

# Unit 1: What is the influence of the media in shaping cultural perceptions?

## OPINION

# Faking Cultural Literacy

By Karl Taro Greenfeld

May 24, 2014

LOS ANGELES — I CAN'T help it. Every few weeks, my wife mentions the latest book her book club is reading, and no matter what it is, whether I've read it or not, I offer an opinion of the work, based entirely on ... what, exactly? Often, these are books I've not even read a review or essay about, yet I freely hold forth on the grandiosity of Cheryl Strayed or the restrained sentimentality of Edwidge Danticat. These data motes are gleaned, apparently, from the ether — or, more realistically, from various social media feeds.

What was Solange Knowles's elevator attack on Jay-Z about? I didn't watch the security-camera video on TMZ — it would have taken too long — but I scrolled through enough chatter to know that Solange had scrubbed her Instagram feed of photos of her sister, Beyoncé. How about this season of "Game of Thrones" and that nonconsensual intercourse in the crypt? I don't watch the show, but I've scanned the recaps on Vulture.com, and I am prepared to argue that this was deeply offensive. Is Pope Francis a postmodern pontiff? I've never listened to one of his homilies nor watched his recent "60 Minutes" appearance, but I've seen plenty of his @Pontifex tweets retweeted, so I'm ready to say his position on inequality and social justice is remarkably progressive.

It's never been so easy to pretend to know so much without actually knowing anything. We pick topical, relevant bits from Facebook, Twitter or emailed news alerts, and then regurgitate them. Instead of watching "Mad Men" or the Super Bowl or the Oscars or a presidential debate, you can simply scroll through someone else's live-tweeting of it, or read the recaps the next day. Our cultural canon is becoming determined by whatever gets the most clicks.

In his 1987 book "Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know," E. D. Hirsch Jr. listed 5,000 essential concepts and names — 1066, Babbitt, Pickwickian — that educated people should be familiar with. (Or at least that's what I believe he wrote, not having actually read the book.) Mr. Hirsch's book, along with its contemporary "The Closing of the American Mind" by Allan Bloom, made the point that cultural literacy — Mr. Bloom's canon — was the bedrock of our agreed-upon values.

What we all feel now is the constant pressure to know enough, at all times, lest we be revealed as culturally illiterate. So that we can survive an elevator pitch, a business meeting, a visit to the office kitchenette, a cocktail party, so that we can post, tweet, chat, comment, text as if we have seen, read, watched, listened. What matters to us, awash in petabytes of data, is not necessarily having actually consumed this content firsthand but simply knowing that it exists — and having a position on it, being able to engage in the chatter *about* it. We come perilously close to performing a pastiche of knowledgeability that is really a new model of know-nothingness.

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NPR's April Fools' Day web story "Why Doesn't America Read Anymore?" went viral on Facebook, where pranksters in on the joke linked to the piece and others then argued that they *do too* read and indignantly shared the link with exhortations to "read the story!" without actually clicking on it themselves to see that the only content was the

revelation that the whole thing was a prank: “We sometimes get the sense that some people are commenting on NPR stories that they haven’t actually read. If you are reading this, please like this post and do not comment on it. Then let’s see what people have to say about this ‘story.’ ”

According to a recent survey by the American Press Institute, nearly six in 10 Americans acknowledge that they do nothing more than read news headlines — and I know this only because I skimmed a Washington Post headline about the survey. After we’ve skimmed, we share. Commenters frequently start their posts with TL;DR — short for Too Long; Didn’t Read — and then proceed to offer an opinion on the subject at hand anyway. As Tony Haile, the chief executive of the web traffic analytics company Chartbeat, recently put it, “We’ve found effectively no correlation between social shares and people actually reading.” (He tweeted that.)



Jennifer Daniel

It’s not lying, exactly, when we nod knowingly at a cocktail party or over drinks when a colleague mentions a movie or book that we have not actually seen or read, nor even read a review of. There is a very good chance that our conversational partner may herself be simply repeating the mordant observations of someone in her timeline or feed. The entire in-person exchange is built from a few factoids netted in the course of a day’s scanning of iPhone apps. Who wants to be the Luddite who slows everything down by admitting he has never actually read a Malcolm Gladwell book and maybe doesn’t exactly understand what is meant by the term “Gladwellian” — though he occasionally uses it himself?

Whenever anyone, anywhere, mentions anything, we must pretend to know about it. Data has become our currency. (And in the case of Bitcoin, a classic example of something that we all talk about but nobody actually seems to understand, I mean that literally.)

Those of us in the business of gathering, dispensing and otherwise trafficking in information may be among the worst offenders. Recently I was on the phone with an editor who mentioned a piece by a prominent author. I claimed I had read the story. It was only later in the conversation that it became clear to me that the article had not yet been published and I could not possibly have read it. By then we had moved on to discussing a possible article on a California politician caught in a rather complicated scandal. Neither of us could come up with his first name. Did that prevent us from talking pseudo-knowledgably about the pros and cons of the potential story? Absolutely not.

It’s understandable that one party or even both parties in a conversation may have only the faintest idea of what is being talked about. We’re all very busy — busier, if I believe the harried responses (when there are any at all) to most emails I send, than any previous generation. And because we spend so much time staring at our phones and screens, texting and tweeting about how busy we are, we no longer have the time to consume any primary material. We rely instead on the casual observations of our “friends” or the people we “follow” or, well, who, actually?

Who decides what we know, what opinions we see, what ideas we are repurposing as our own observations? Algorithms, apparently, as Google, Facebook, Twitter and the rest of the social media postindustrial complex rely on these complicated mathematical tools to determine what we are actually reading and seeing and buying.

We have outsourced our opinions to this loop of data that will allow us to hold steady at a dinner party, though while you and I are ostensibly talking about “The Grand Budapest Hotel,” what we are actually doing, since neither of us has seen it, is comparing social media feeds. Does anyone anywhere ever admit that he or she is completely lost in the conversation? No. We nod and say, “I’ve heard the name,” or “It sounds very familiar,” which usually means we are totally unfamiliar with the subject at hand.

THERE was a time when we knew where we were getting our ideas. In my eighth grade English class, we were assigned “A Tale of Two Cities,” and lest we enjoy the novel, we were instructed to read Charles Dickens’s classic with an eye toward tracking the symbolism in the text. One afternoon while I was in the library, struggling to find symbols, I ran into a few of my classmates, who removed from their pockets folded yellow and black pamphlets that read “Cliffs Notes” and beneath that the title of Dickens’s novel in block letters. That “study guide” was a revelation.

Here were the plot, the characters, even the symbols, all laid out in paragraphs and bullet points. I read the Cliffs Notes in one night, and wrote my B paper without finishing the novel. The lesson was not to immerse and get lost in the actual cultural document itself but to mine it for any valuable ore and minerals — data, factoids, *what you need to know* — and then trade them on the open market.

With the advent of each new technology — movable type, radio, television, the Internet — there have been laments that the end is nigh for illuminated manuscripts, for books, magazines and newspapers. What is different now is the ubiquity of the technology that is replacing every old medium.

The information is everywhere, a constant feed in our hands, in our pockets, on our desktops, our cars, even in the cloud. The data stream can’t be shut off. It pours into our lives a rising tide of words, facts, jokes, GIFs, gossip and commentary that threatens to drown us. Perhaps it is this fear of submersion that is behind this insistence that we’ve seen, we’ve read, we *know*. It’s a none-too-convincing assertion that we are still afloat. So here we are, desperately paddling, making observations about pop culture memes, because to admit that we’ve fallen behind, that we don’t know what anyone is talking about, that we have nothing to say about each passing blip on the screen, is to be dead.

A journalist and the author of the forthcoming novel “SubPrime.”

OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

# We Don't Have to Give In to the Smartphones

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By Jonathan Haidt, Will Johnson and Zach Rausch

Dr. Haidt is a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business. Mr. Johnson is the chief executive of the Harris Poll. Mr. Rausch is a senior research scientist at the Stern School.

June 18, 2025

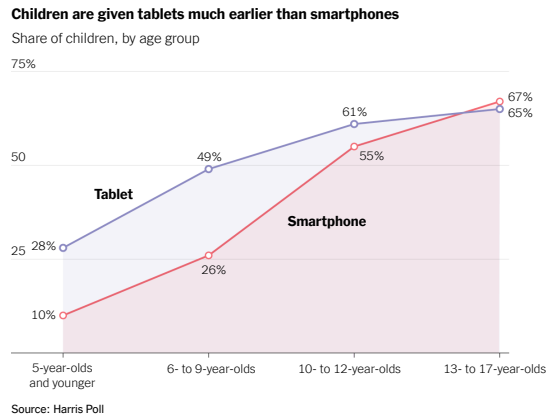
Since the dawn of the television age, parents have struggled to limit or guide their children's screen time.

But with the arrival of smartphones that can — and do — go everywhere and with social media apps that teenagers now use for an average of five hours every day, many parents feel a sense of resignation. The struggle has been lost. Parents who try to delay giving a smartphone until high school or social media until 16 know that they'll face the plaintive cry from their children: “But I'm the only one!”

To better understand the tensions over technology playing out in American families, we worked with the Harris Poll to conduct two surveys. As we reported last year, our survey of 1,006 members of Gen Z found that many young people feel trapped — tethered to digital products like TikTok and Snapchat. Nearly half of all participants expressed regret about having access to many of the most popular social media platforms.

Here we present the second part of our investigation: a nationally representative survey of 1,013 parents who have children under 18. The overall picture isn't any better. We find widespread feelings of entrapment and regret. Many parents gave their children smartphones and social media access early in their lives — yet many wish that social media had never been invented, and overwhelmingly they support new social norms and policies that would protect kids from online harms.

In our survey, 55 percent report that their children began to use a smartphone as a primary user by the age of 12, and 61 percent say the same for a tablet.



Over the last 15 years, as children began to receive these devices at ever younger ages, social media access followed inexorably — despite the legal minimum age of 13 for companies to collect data from children without parental consent. Among children who currently use Instagram, half were doing so by the age of 13, and the same figure holds for Snapchat. For TikTok, it was slightly higher at 57 percent. (Those numbers come from the parents. Of course, many children created accounts earlier without their parents' knowledge.)

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Almost a third of parents whose children have social media believe they gave their child access to social media too young, and 22 percent feel similarly for smartphones. Notably, for both technologies, only 1 percent of parents thought they had waited too long to introduce them. In other words, parents regret the technologies they gave, not the technologies they withheld.

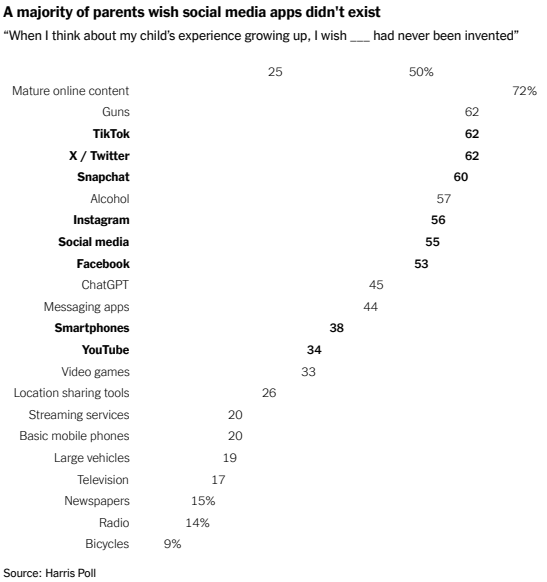
Why did so many parents make decisions that they regret? One major reason is that in the brief period when flip phones and other basic phones were replaced by smartphones, roughly from 2010 to 2015, there was a pervasive sense of techno-optimism. Most people were amazed by the new technology and its beneficial applications — from the mundane like hailing a car service to the profound like bringing down a dictatorship.

A common belief at the time was that being a so-called digital native would give children an advantage in the new world taking shape around us. It was only in the late 2010s that a deep unease began to arise as it became increasingly clear that children who grew up with smartphones and social media were not better adapted. In fact, they were becoming more anxious, depressed, isolated, sedentary and unable to focus.

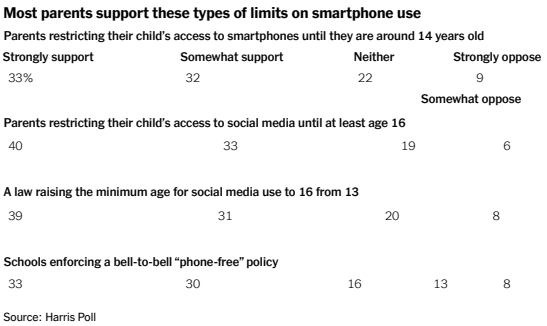
There was an additional reason for those regretted decisions: social pressure. More than one third of parents (39 percent) who had given their child a smartphone said that they would have preferred to wait but they felt they had to give in because so many of their children's friends already had one. For social media, the social pressure was even stronger: 54 percent of those who let their child have access to social media said they felt they had to because so many other families had already done so.

The digital regret shows up most clearly in a set of questions we asked about a variety of consumer products. The exact question was “When I think about my child’s experience growing up, I wish \_\_\_\_ had never been invented.” As the accompanying chart shows, parents have very little regret about giving bicycles to their children, even though many of their children presumably got hurt while biking at some point. In contrast, most parents perceive alcohol, guns and pornography as bad things, at least in the context of their children’s development. So what about the technologies that dominate children’s lives today? Are they closer to bicycles or to alcohol?

For smartphones and for YouTube, they are midway between. Around a third of parents regret their existence, but most don’t. In contrast, a majority of parents wish that social media in general, and Facebook and Instagram in particular, had never been invented. For X and TikTok, the percentage was 62 percent, which was higher than for alcohol and equal to guns.



It turns out that Gen Z has at least as much regret about the role that technology played in their childhoods. In our previous survey we found that 30 percent of adult Gen Z-ers agreed with the statement “I had access to smartphones too early in my life” and 34 percent said the same for social media. Forty-five percent also agreed that if or when they have children, they will not allow them to have smartphones before high school.



We have proposed four norms intended to help free families from the collective action trap — the feeling that they have to give in because everyone else has done so. It’s hard for any one parent or school to act alone. But when families and schools act together, change becomes possible. These norms are meant to reinforce one another, and when combined, they offer a road map for reclaiming a healthier and more joyful childhood.

The first norm is to delay smartphones until high school. Our survey found that two-thirds of parents said they would prefer to wait until at least age 14. The second is to delay social media until age 16 — a goal supported by 73 percent of parents, with 70 percent backing a legal age minimum of 16.

The third norm is phone-free schools, where students are separated from devices from the first bell to the last, including lunch and recess; 63 percent of parents support this policy. Finally, the fourth norm is about giving kids something better to do: more independence, free play and responsibility in the real world. Forty percent of parents with children aged 6 to 12 years said they want to give their kids more freedom to be out with peers unsupervised. Among parents of teenagers, that number rises to 47 percent.

These strong levels of support cross racial, economic and political lines. And the good news is that many parents are legislators, teachers and school superintendents, and they are actively promoting these ideas. Ten states have already enacted laws making their schools phone-free. Less strict laws on phone use in schools have been enacted in 21 states, and phone-restriction laws are under consideration in 14 more states and the District of Columbia.

This is happening outside the United States, too. Every school in Brazil has gone phone-free bell-to-bell. Australia has raised the age for opening social media accounts to 16; other countries are quite likely to follow suit. The president of France, Emmanuel Macron, recently announced his intention to enact a minimum age of 15 for social media use in France if the European Union does not enact a similar restriction first.

With tech companies eagerly filling our children’s lives — and their classrooms — with more new and untested technologies (A.I. “friends,” tutors and other forms of virtual reality), it is becoming that much more urgent for parents to speak up and for legislators to act.

The goal of these reforms isn’t just to limit screens. It’s much bigger than that. The goal is to restore childhood.

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GUEST ESSAY

# The Era of A.I. Propaganda Has Arrived, and America Must Act

Aug. 5, 2025

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By Brett J. Goldstein and Brett V. Benson

Mr. Goldstein and Mr. Benson are professors at Vanderbilt University who specialize in national and international security.

Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections were pretty low-tech. Relying on generic bot messaging, low-quality content and mass targeting, their operations probably had limited impact.

Those days are over. With the exponential rise of generative A.I. systems, the greatest danger is no longer a flood of invective and falsehoods on social media. Rather, it is the slow, subtle and corrosive manipulation of online communication — propaganda designed not to shock, but to slip silently into our everyday digital discussions. We have entered a new era in international influence operations, where A.I.-generated narratives shift the political landscape without drawing attention.

A Chinese company called GoLaxy is already undertaking such operations, according to a large cache of documents recently uncovered by the Vanderbilt University Institute of National Security, where we work. The materials show GoLaxy emerging as a leader in technologically advanced, state-aligned influence campaigns, which deploy humanlike bot networks and psychological profiling to target individuals. Its activities and claims suggest it has connections to the Chinese government.

GoLaxy has already deployed its technology in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the documents suggest it may be preparing to expand into the United States. A.I.-driven propaganda is no longer a hypothetical future threat. It is operational, sophisticated and already reshaping how public opinion can be manipulated on a large scale.

A representative of GoLaxy said the company focused on services for business intelligence and denied it had developed a bot network or psychological profiling tools targeting individuals. The company also denied being under the authority of any government agency or organization.

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What sets GoLaxy apart is its integration of generative A.I. with enormous troves of personal data. Its systems continually mine social media platforms to build dynamic psychological profiles. Its content is customized to a person's values, beliefs, emotional tendencies and vulnerabilities. According to the documents, A.I. personas can then engage users in what appears to be a conversation — content that feels authentic, adapts in real-time and avoids detection. The result is a highly efficient propaganda engine that's designed to be nearly indistinguishable from legitimate online interaction, delivered instantaneously at a scale never before achieved.

While the documents offered no specific examples of these conversations, they describe how the technology develops personalized content. By extracting user data and studying broader patterns, A.I. can build synthetic messaging designed to appeal to a wide spectrum of the public. It can adapt to a user's tone, values, habits and interests, according to the documents. Then it can mimic real users by liking posts, leaving comments and pushing targeted content.

According to the documents we uncovered, GoLaxy used its technology to minimize opposition to a 2020 national security law that cracked down on political dissent, identifying thousands of participants and thought leaders from 180,000 Hong Kong Twitter accounts. Then GoLaxy went after what it perceived as lies and misconceptions, "correcting" the sources via its army of fake profiles.

The company struck again in the lead-up to the 2024 Taiwanese election, when China-aligned groups peddled false claims of corruption and posted deepfakes on social media. During the campaign, GoLaxy suggested ways to undermine Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party, which opposes China's claims over the island. The company gathered and most likely supplied information on trends in Taiwanese political debate and recommended the deployment of bot networks to exploit political divisions between its parties. GoLaxy had already amassed an abundance of data on Taiwan to support such intrusions, according to the documents, including organizational maps of government institutions — down to their political tendencies, attitude toward China and GPS coordinates — and profiles of over 5,000 accounts belonging to Taiwanese people.

In a written statement, GoLaxy denied providing technical support for activities in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

So far, GoLaxy's active deployments appear to have been confined to the Indo-Pacific. Evidence in the documents suggests that the company is positioning itself for expanded operations, including in the United States. GoLaxy has assembled data profiles of at least 117 members of the U.S. Congress and over 2,000 American political figures and thought leaders. Assuming GoLaxy continues to build American dossiers, it is possible the company will bring its operations across the Pacific. It said it has not collected data targeting U.S. officials.

GoLaxy operates in close alignment with China's national security priorities, although no formal government control has been publicly confirmed. The company was founded in 2010 by a research institute at the state-controlled Chinese Academy of Sciences, and has been chaired by a deputy director from the same institute. Since then, GoLaxy has, according to the documents, worked with top-level intelligence, party and military bodies, suggesting integration with China's political system.

GoLaxy's strategic alignment became clearer in 2021, when it received funding from Sugon, a Beijing-based supercomputing company flagged by the Pentagon as a Chinese military affiliate. GoLaxy's public-facing A.I. platform coordinates with Sugon's supercomputers and DeepSeek-R1, one of China's leading A.I. models.

These connections are a reminder that influence operations are no longer a sideshow — they are becoming core instruments of statecraft. Battlefields include not only geographic territory with troops and ships but also the online platforms we use every day.

The strategy deployed by GoLaxy and others weaponizes the openness that underpins democratic societies. Debate, transparency and pluralism — hallmarks of democratic strength — are also points of vulnerability. Technological tools like GoLaxy's exploit these qualities. The line between surveillance and persuasion is disappearing, fast.

The danger lies in the stealth and scale of these methods, and the speed with which they are improving. A.I.-generated content can be deployed quietly across entire populations with minimal resistance. It operates continually, shaping opinion and corroding democratic institutions beneath the surface. Imagine today's most effective social media platforms, but on a far greater scale, using a far more comprehensive model of its targets and synthetic propaganda that is even more compelling and difficult to resist.

To counter the growing threat of A.I.-driven foreign influence operations, a coordinated response is essential. Academic researchers must work urgently to map how artificial intelligence, open-source intelligence and online influence campaigns converge to serve hostile state objectives. The U.S. government must take the lead in disrupting the infrastructure behind these operations, with the Defense Department targeting foreign influence networks and the Federal Bureau of Investigation working closely with digital platforms to identify and counter false personas. The private sector needs to accelerate A.I. detection capabilities to bolster our ability to detect synthetic content. If we can't identify it, we can't stop it.

We are entering a new era of gray-zone conflict — one marked by information warfare executed at a scale, speed and degree of sophistication never seen before. If we don't quickly figure out how to defend against this kind of A.I.-driven influence, we will be completely exposed.

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GUEST ESSAY

# Charisma Rules the World

June 16, 2025

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By Molly Worthen

Dr. Worthen, a historian at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, is the author of “Spellbound: How Charisma Shaped American History From the Puritans to Donald Trump.”

The 2020s should have been the decade when American politics began to make sense. The multibillion-dollar industry of public opinion polling can turn vibe shifts into tweetable bar graphs and trend lines. Surveys have found that affiliation with traditional religious institutions has mostly declined over the past generation, so one might conclude that more Americans now form their worldviews and choose leaders based on cool logic and material interest. And over this data-driven landscape extends the lengthening shadow of our artificial intelligence overlords, who promise to rationalize more and more of our lives, for our own good.

Yet somehow, despite the experts’ interactive graphics and the tricks that large language models can do, it has only gotten harder to understand the worldviews and political choices of half the country (whichever half you don’t belong to). Perhaps, then, we should pay more attention to the human quirks that confound statisticians and that A.I. can’t quite crack — desires and drives that have not changed much over the centuries. That means rescuing a familiar word from decades of confusion and cliché: charisma.

In New Testament Greek, the word means gift of grace or supernatural power. But when we use it to describe the appeal of a politician, a preacher’s hold over his congregation or a YouTube guru with a surprisingly large following, we are taking a cue from the sociologist Max Weber. He spent much of his career studying what happens to spiritual impulses as a society becomes more secular and bureaucratic.

A little more than a century ago, he borrowed “charisma” from the Bible and Christian history to describe the relationship between leaders and followers in both religion and politics. Charisma, he wrote, is a form of authority that does not depend on institutional office, military might or claims on tradition. Instead, charisma derives from followers’ belief that their leader possesses a supernatural mission and power: “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men.”

Weber described himself as “religiously unmusical” and insisted that he was reinventing charisma in a “completely value-neutral sense.” But the magnetism that he observed in some leaders — and their followers’ sense of calling and duty — seemed to demand a spiritual description. The secular vocabulary developing in his corner of academia, the new disciplines of the social sciences, was not up to the task. “In order to do justice to their mission, the holders of charisma, the master as well as his disciples and followers, must stand outside the ties of this world,” he wrote.

Even as he resisted his colleagues’ tendencies to reduce human behavior to animal instincts and reflexes, Weber missed a key element. Charisma is not something that leaders have; it’s something that they do. Charisma is a kind of storytelling. It’s an ability to invite followers into a transcendent narrative about what their lives mean.

**Charisma is not the same thing** as charm or celebrity. Americans have mixed up these concepts since the 1950s and ’60s, when Weber’s idea leached into newspaper election coverage and everyday speech. When I began working on a book about charismatic leaders throughout American history, I was in this muddle myself. I confused charisma with charm: a person’s ability to engage you in conversation and make you feel like the center of attention.

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But winning elections, beginning a mass movement or starting a religion requires more than a knack for working a room. Charm, it turns out, is not even a uniquely human quality. The latest intelligent social agent chatbots like Replika have better social skills than many humans. Rob Brooks, an evolutionary biologist who set out recently to test A.I.’s ability to play on our social instincts, wrote that his Replika chatbot always wants to hear about his day, asks great follow-up questions and “really gets me.”

Anyone who has read or heard about Dale Carnegie’s “How to Win Friends and Influence People” knows that charm follows a formula (mainly, offer specific praise and focus on the other person’s problems rather than your own concerns). A.I. agents run these scripts better than we can. They “are really good at making you feel seen,” Dr. Brooks, who works at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, told me. With each generation of innovation, A.I. gets better at manipulating human “algorithms”: the impulses that we share with our fellow primates, especially our desire to like and be liked, just as chimpanzees groom one another to strengthen social bonds.

But charisma may remain one of the few human dynamics that elude A.I., because it is not the conversational allogrooming at which A.I. excels. It is based not on primate instincts of attraction but on our aspirations to higher meaning, enlivened with a dose of the social friction that A.I. agents are designed to eliminate. Charisma can be just as repellent as it is attractive, so it usually baffles or disgusts anyone not under its thrall.

My research took me from Puritan mystics and early Mormons to Black nationalism and Pentecostal revivals to the cults and management gurus of the 1970s and ’80s, all the way to President Trump. Some of these figures possessed good looks, great oratorical skills, sex appeal or charm — but surprisingly few, as far as I could tell.

They had something far more important in common: They promised to pull back the veil on secret truth. They revealed how followers’ struggles have a purpose — one that the reigning elites and institutions belittled or missed entirely. In the 1630s, the Puritan midwife-theologian Anne Hutchinson recruited most of the Boston congregation with her promise that her fellow colonists could learn directly from scripture and the Holy Spirit that they were saved.

That divine assurance, she said, meant that they should not meekly accept everything their ministers taught. “I’ll bring you to a woman that preaches better Gospel than any of your black-coats that have been at the ninniversity,” one of her followers declared. When clergy and magistrates banished her from Massachusetts Bay in 1638, they might have expelled the heretic, but they couldn’t extinguish her idea’s core appeal: Americans’ hunger for a role in a cosmic story that turned their private anxieties into assurance that a higher power would, one day, remedy their worldly miseries and justify their suffering.

If leaders can tell stories like this, then they don't need gravitas or charm. In fact their oratory and personal presence can — and almost certainly will — provoke mixed reviews. In the 1840s, one skeptic who met Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, described him as “a coarse, plebeian, sensual person in aspect, and his countenance exhibits a curious mixture of the knave and the clown. His hands are large and fat.”

Yet converts found an answer to their frustrations with traditional Christianity and personal dead ends in Smith's story about the gold plates, his revelation of the young Republic's central role in God's plan and the divine mandate to build a new Zion. For them, just shaking his hand brought “the Holy Spirit in such great abundance that I felt it thrill my whole system, from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet,” one convert wrote.

These polarized reactions — based on whether the leader offers you a heroic role in his narrative, casts you as a villain or leaves you out entirely — are the real mark of charisma. For all the research on the importance of body language, whether we find a speaker bewitching or irritating depends on our relationship to the person's message. Mr. Trump's speeches strike his supporters as authentic truth telling in an era of fake news, while his critics struggle to understand how anyone has patience for his stream-of-consciousness rambling. “Some people would look at Trump and think, ‘That's ludicrous. That's not meaningful,’” Cody Kommers, a researcher at the Alan Turing Institute in London, told me. “But clearly for a lot of people, there is meaning being generated there, some sort of narrative that people are tapping into.”

**Narratives usually follow** patterns. In recent years, scholars have used software to analyze thousands of books and chart the basic emotional arcs of classic literature, ranging from the Icarus narrative of rise and fall to the triumphal Cinderella plot. Psychologists have found that when they interview people about their life stories with a series of questions based on the so-called hero's journey — a narrative structure present in myths across cultures — they are more likely to find significance in the twists and turns of their own lives. Dr. Kommers and his colleagues have tried the same thing with large language models, or L.L.M.s. “We give them a character profile, give them the hero's journey and have them tell the story again. The question is, can L.L.M.s show the same effects of restorying? Yes, they can.”

But charismatic leaders do far more than reproduce generic plot structures or parrot the stages of Joseph Campbell's “Hero With a Thousand Faces.” They tell a strange story that speaks to the anxieties of their moment in history, not a formulaic one that could suit any time or place. They possess an uncanny intuition to zigzag when everyone else is heading straight.

Marcus Garvey supercharged the tradition of Black nationalism by reinventing — even breaking — older models of Black leadership. He arrived in New York City during World War I and honed a flair for pageantry that spoke to African American society of that place and time: full of veterans angry that the promises of Western democracy did not fully apply to them and members of Black fraternal orders who had found the dignity they deserved in uniforms and rituals.

At a time when most attention focused on Black leaders who were fair skinned and college educated, he cut a different figure. His archenemy, W.E.B. Du Bois, described Garvey as “a little fat black man” and a “demagogue.” But Du Bois belonged to the Black elite; Garvey's working-class followers saw him through the empowering story he told. “If 400,000,000 Negroes can only get to know themselves, to know that in them is a sovereign power, is an authority that is absolute, then in the next 24 hours we would have a new race, we would have a new nation, an empire,” he preached.

Smartly dressed legions of his Universal Negro Improvement Association paraded behind their leader, who often wore a plumed helmet and purple, green and gold robes. Garvey's vision for Pan-African economic, political and spiritual power was a remix of old and new archetypes: part Carnegie, part Napoleon, part Moses. Those who joined the association found themselves in three roles at once. They were self-made men and women, conquering soldiers and chosen people claiming a divine inheritance.

**Charisma has no** inherent moral valence. It can empower freedom fighters or enable tyrants. But in a healthy society, other authorities counterbalance the new picture of reality that a charismatic leader claims to reveal. Universities and government institutions staffed with experts, religious and philosophical traditions that place current events in a longer context, established media with professional journalists and international news bureaus — all these help ordinary people evaluate the story a leader is telling. But for more than a generation, study after study has documented the collapse of public trust in these institutions.

Our current moment encourages the impulse to retreat to your phone and ask a chatbot to help you sort out the world. It also invites a charismatic leader who can rework classic American story lines and answer the frustrations of people alienated from the invisible experts, confusing rules, profit motives and organizational inertia sometimes just called “the system.” (Weber described our modern condition as an “iron cage.”)

Mr. Trump began crafting a story to explain all this long before he formally entered politics. Since the 1980s, he has cast himself as the hero-entrepreneur who built an empire by working the system and the populist avenger who will vindicate the little guy. “I do get tired of seeing the country ripped off,” he told Oprah Winfrey in 1988, when she asked him whether he had considered running for president. “If it got so bad, I would never want to rule it out totally.”

Mr. Trump is the bard of the burn-it-down age. His mix of national and personal mythology fuses political strategy with his gut reactions. The more those reactions horrify his critics, the more his most committed supporters adore him, because you don't have to be likable to be charismatic. Likability can be an impediment if you're crusading to break through the polite lies of mainstream politics.

Let's be clear about the human strangeness and genius of this. No machine programmed to spew out tropes according to statistical frequency could reproduce the components of Mr. Trump's charisma or the appeal of Hutchinson, Smith and Garvey before him. Mr. Trump's abrasive personal style and love of chaos are the opposite of a Replika chatbot's soothing, frictionless responses. Yet both appeal in our secular, disconnected age, when many Americans choose to sit alone scrolling TikTok conspiracy theories instead of joining live human beings in a church, school board meeting, bowling league, Scout troop or any of the other depopulated relics of an earlier, more connected time.

In our hyperindividualized age, a lot of us are searching for a storyteller: someone or something to tell us what our lives mean. Compared with the sense of purpose and identity that past generations found in sturdy communities, now “it's very difficult to tell the story of who you are and what you're doing,” Dr. Kommers said. “Psychology and A.I. don't have a way to help us with that. That's one of the reasons there's this pervasive feeling that technology doesn't make our lives better.”

Americans are still waiting for a leader who invites us into a plotline that moves beyond 2025. We need a story that reckons with reality, but does not trap us in it.

Molly Worthen, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, is the author, most recently, of “Spellbound: How Charisma Shaped American History From the Puritans to Donald Trump.”

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GUEST ESSAY

# Thinking Is Becoming a Luxury Good

July 28, 2025

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By Mary Harrington

Ms. Harrington is a journalist based in Britain.

When I was a kid in the 1980s, my parents sent me to a Waldorf school in England. At the time, the school discouraged parents from allowing their kids to watch too much TV, instead telling them to emphasize reading, hands-on learning and outdoor play.

I chafed at the stricture then. But perhaps they were on to something: Today I don't watch much TV and I still read a lot. Since my school days, however, a far more insidious and enticing form of tech has taken hold: the internet, especially via smartphones. These days I know I have to put my phone in a drawer or in another room if I need to concentrate for more than a few minutes.

Since so-called intelligence tests were invented around a century ago, until recently, international I.Q. scores climbed steadily in a phenomenon known as the Flynn effect. But there is evidence that our ability to apply that brain power is decreasing. According to a recent report, adult literacy scores leveled off and began to decline across a majority of O.E.C.D. countries in the past decade, with some of the sharpest declines visible among the poorest. Kids also show declining literacy.

Writing in The Financial Times, John Burn-Murdoch links this to the rise of a post-literate culture in which we consume most of our media through smartphones, eschewing dense text in favor of images and short-form video. Other research has associated smartphone use with A.D.H.D. symptoms in adolescents, and a quarter of surveyed American adults now suspect they may have the condition. School and college teachers assign fewer full books to their students, in part because they are unable to complete them. Nearly half of Americans read zero books in 2023.

The idea that technology is altering our capacity not just to concentrate but also to read and to reason is catching on. The conversation no one is ready for, though, is how this may be creating yet another form of inequality.

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Think of this by comparison with patterns of junk food consumption: As ultraprocessed snacks have grown more available and inventively addictive, developed societies have seen a gulf emerge between those with the social and economic resources to sustain a healthy lifestyle and those more vulnerable to the obesogenic food culture. This bifurcation is strongly class-inflected: Across the developed West, obesity has become strongly correlated with poverty. I fear that so, too, will be the tide of post-literacy.

Long-form literacy is not innate but learned, sometimes laboriously. As Maryanne Wolf, a literacy scholar, has illustrated, acquiring and perfecting a capacity for long-form “expert reading” is literally mind-altering. It rewires our brains, increasing vocabulary, shifting brain activity toward the analytic left hemisphere and honing our capacity for concentration, linear reasoning and deep thought. The presence of these traits at scale contributed to the emergence of free speech, modern science and liberal democracy, among other things.

The habits of thought formed by digital reading are very different. As Cal Newport, a productivity expert, shows in his 2016 book, “Deep Work,” the digital environment is optimized for distraction, as various systems compete for our attention with notifications and other demands. Social media platforms are designed to be addictive, and the sheer volume of material incentivizes intense cognitive “bites” of discourse calibrated for maximum compulsiveness over nuance or thoughtful reasoning. The resulting patterns of content consumption form us neurologically for skimming, pattern recognition and distracted hopping from text to text — if we use our phones to read at all.

Increasingly, the very act of reading scarcely seems necessary. Platforms such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts offer a bottomless supply of enthralling, short-form videos. These combine with visual memes, fake news, real news, clickbait, sometimes hostile misinformation and, increasingly, a torrent of A.I.-generated slop content. The result is a media environment that seems like the cognitive equivalent of the junk food aisle and is every bit as difficult to resist as those colorful, unhealthy packages.

A classical liberal might retort: Sure, but just as with junk food, it's up to the individual to make healthy choices. What this fails to take into account, though, is that just like the negative health impacts of junk food overconsumption, the cognitive harms of digital media will be more pronounced at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale.

We see hints of this already. As Dr. Wolf points out, literacy and poverty have long been correlated. Now poor kids spend more time on screens each day than rich ones — in one 2019 study, about two hours more per day for U.S. tweens and teenagers whose families made less than \$35,000 per year, compared with peers whose household incomes exceeded \$100,000. Research indicates that kids who are exposed to more than two hours a day of recreational screen time have worse working memory, processing speed, attention levels, language skills and executive function than kids who are not.

Bluntly: Making healthy cognitive choices is hard. In a culture saturated with more accessible and engrossing forms of entertainment, long-form literacy may soon become the domain of elite subcultures.

Already, elites, religious groups and conservatives are embracing self-imposed limits on tech use. Between 2019 and 2023, over 250 new classical schools, many of them Christian, opened in America, with an ethos centered on long-form “great books” literacy. New guides and initiatives from this crowd abound, such as the recent book “The Tech Exit: A Practical Guide to Freeing Kids and Teens From Smartphones,” by Clare Morell, a fellow at a conservative think tank.

It's not just conservatives. Tech notables such as Bill Gates and Evan Spiegel have spoken publicly about curbing their kids' use of screens. Others hire nannies who are required to sign “no phone” contracts, or send their kids to Waldorf schools, where such devices are banned or heavily restricted. The class scissor here is razor-sharp: A majority of classical schools are fee-paying institutions. Shielding your kids from device overuse at the Waldorf School of the Peninsula will set you back \$34,000 a year at the elementary grades.

Many U.S. states, including California, are restricting student smartphone use, which in theory ought to level the playing field. But it is optimistic to assume such rules will be enforced with the same determination in small-class private schools as in massive public schools, let alone in these students' homes.

Even beyond Silicon Valley, some people are limiting digital stimulation (like social media or video games) for set periods of time as part of the self-improvement practice of dopamine fasting.

The ascetic approach to cognitive fitness is still niche and concentrated among the wealthy. But as new generations reach adulthood having never lived in a world without smartphones, we can expect the culture to stratify ever more starkly. On the one hand, a relatively small group of people will retain, and intentionally develop, the capacity for concentration and long-form reasoning. On the other, a larger general population will be effectively post-literate — with all the consequences this implies for cognitive clarity.

What will happen if this becomes fully realized? An electorate that has lost the capacity for long-form thought will be more tribal, less rational, largely uninterested in facts or even matters of historical record, moved more by vibes than cogent argument and open to fantastical ideas and bizarre conspiracy theories. If that sounds familiar, it may be a sign of how far down this path the West has already traveled.

For canny operators, such a public affords new opportunities for corruption. Oligarchs attempting to shape policy to their advantage will benefit from the fact that few will have the attention span to track or challenge policies in dull, technical fields; what a majority now wants is not forensic investigation but a new video short “owning” the other tribe. We can expect the governing class to adapt pragmatically to the electorate's collective decline in rational capacity, for example, by retaining the rituals associated with mass democracy while quietly shifting key policy areas beyond the reach of a capricious and easily manipulated citizenry. I do not celebrate this, but our net-native youth seem unfazed: International polls show waning support for democracy among Gen Z.

Lest you mistake me, there is no reason the opportunity to sideline the electorate or to arbitrage the gap between vibes and policy should especially favor either the red team or the blue team. This post-literate world favors demagogues skilled at code-switching between the elite language of policy and the populist one of meme-slop. It favors oligarchs with good social media game and those with more self-assurance than integrity. It does not favor those with little money, little political power and no one to speak up for them.

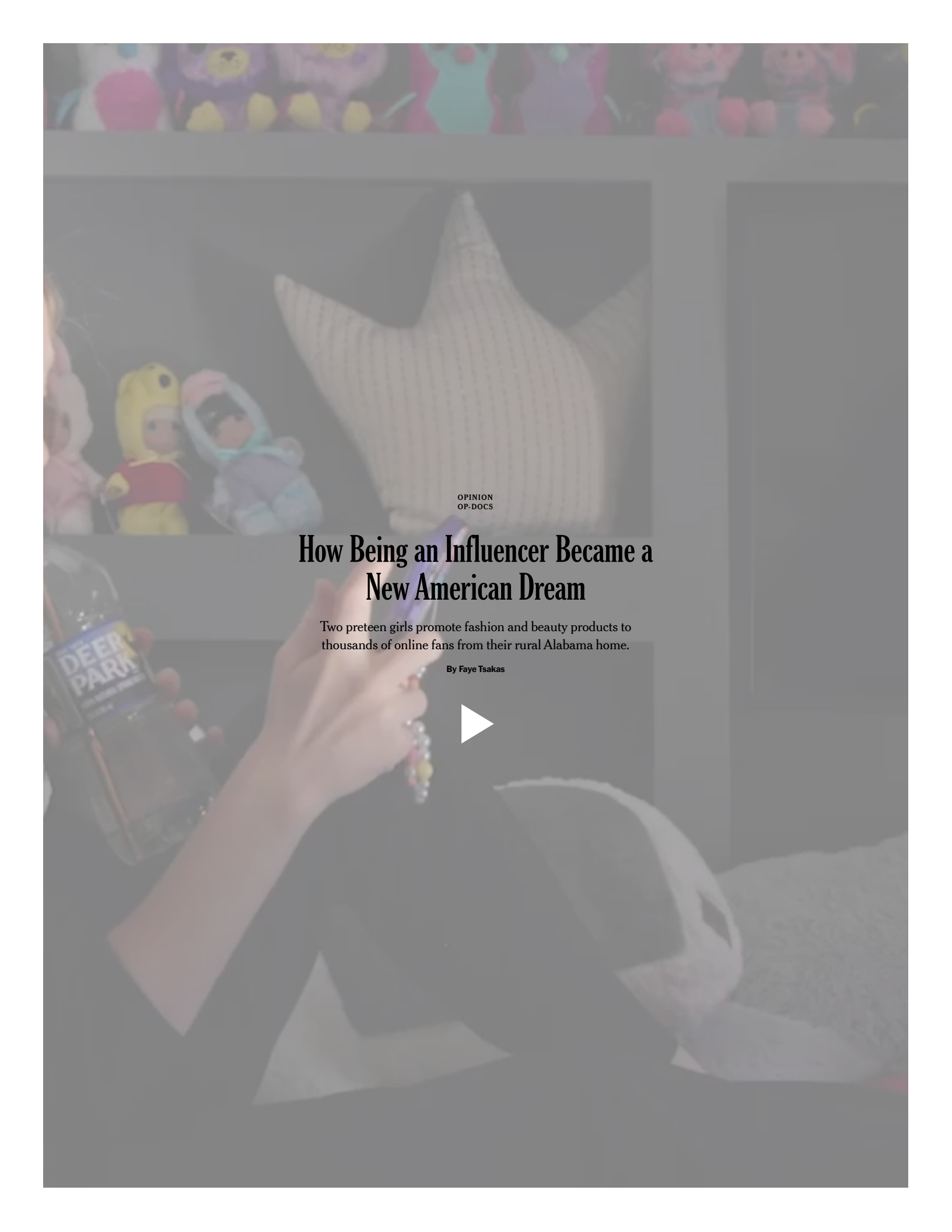
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OPINION  
OF DOCS

## How Being an Influencer Became a New American Dream

Two preteen girls promote fashion and beauty products to thousands of online fans from their rural Alabama home.

By Faye Tsakas



By Faye Tsakas  
Ms. Tsakas is a documentary filmmaker.

Dec. 10, 2024

Whenever I browse social media, I see advice and products for self-improvement — a deluge of elusive promises tethered to consumer goods. How to look more angular or more toned, feel more energized, age backward. Capitalism and modern technology have mixed to create an internet world where users are transformed into brands. As a filmmaker, I’m drawn to document this culture.

I first came across Peyton and Lyla, two preteen sisters and influencers on Instagram, two years ago. (Since they are minors, their last names are withheld to protect their privacy.) From their rural Alabama home under their mother’s watchful gaze, they hawk fashion and beauty products to tens of thousands of online fans around the world. Every day, packages arrive at their doorstep for them to unbox and try out — deluxe makeup sets, floral dresses, exercise bikes — all free, as if delivered by a shopping mall Santa.

With their parents’ permission, I began filming the sisters’ daily lives as influencers; in this short documentary, “Christmas, Every Day,” they shift between performance and reality. Peyton and Lyla, who were 11 and 12 at the time of filming, see themselves as instilling confidence, positivity and a girl-power attitude for other girls — ideas that I wanted to explore within the broader context of modern consumerism.

Whether as creators or viewers or consumers, children are spending more time online at younger and younger ages. What kid wouldn’t want a stream of likes and gifts, waking up to the feeling of, as Peyton and Lyla’s parents put it, “Christmas, every day”? What does it mean to be participants in a larger social media system that encourages and even demands certain behaviors from its users, especially women and girls?

In a time of immense wealth disparity, influencer culture has created a more fantastical kind of American dream. (Perhaps that’s why nearly one-third of preteens say becoming an influencer is a career goal.) Seeing the field’s potential for a steady income — not to mention the prestige of an ever-growing follower count — some parents encourage it. I sought to go behind the scenes of this new creator economy with curiosity and a focus on the girls’ experiences, aiming to allow viewers to come to their own conclusions.

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